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Colonel Ezekiel Polk: Pioneer and Patriarch

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HISTORY knows Colonel Ezekiel Polk only dimly, as grandfather of a President. Yet the diverse careers of this obscure but remarkable man may tell us something that biographies of the great cannot about many of the average characteristics of his generation. Impulsive, avaricious, and grandiloquent, this farmer, Indian fighter, land speculator, politician, filibusterer, Revolutionary soldier, and pioneer on six frontiers, was a unique embodiment of much of the spirit of the Old West in the early days of the republic. His most substantial contribution to his country was a numerous progeny of land-hungry Americans, including a grandson who did not rest until the vast expanse from the Rio Grande to Puget Sound had discovered its Manifest Destiny.

Ezekiel Polk's early years were spent following the advancing frontier. His Scotch-Irish father had settled in Maryland in the 1720's, and, some time before 1740, had followed the lure of land to the Cumberland valley of Pennsylvania. It was here, on December 7, 1747, that Ezekiel was born, the next youngest of five boys and three girls. By the time he was six, the Cumberland country was filling up so rapidly that good lands for the older children were scarce and expensive. Consequently, the entire family packed up its belongings and joined the thousands who were pouring southwestward through the Valley of Virginia.

The Polks did not stop until they reached the very limits of settlement, on the southern boundary of North Carolina in what was to be Mecklenburg County. Here land was to be had for the taking. The older brothers and sisters were soon all married and busy clearing farms and raising families of their own, along the creeks which flowed west into the Catawba River. Ezekiel's father seems to have died soon after reaching North Carolina, and his mother not many years later. The boy was probably left to be brought up by Thomas, the most prosperous of the brothers.1

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1 The most reliable account of the early years of the Polk family in America is to be found in the autobiographical sketch written by Colonel William Polk in the 1830's and published in William H. Hoyt, ed., The Papers of Archibald D. Murphy (Raleigh, 1914), II, 400 ff. For birth dates, see "Polk Births & Deaths," undated

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Life in the Catawba country was far from tranquil. Indian warfare in the late 1750's was followed closely by rioting over land titles and taxes. The latter troubles were no sooner settled, in 1765, than the upcountry was threatened with full-scale civil war. The long-continued exactions of corrupt courthouse rings and tidewater politicians were goading the people of large sections of the interior into a course of resistance that would end only in pitched battle at Alamance Creek in 1771. The ScotchIrish along the Catawba, however, entered into an advantageous political alliance with Governor William Tryon and the tidewater leaders who ran the province, and helped put down the insurgent Regulators.2

Ezekiel Polk grew up in the very midst of the turbulence, for his brother Thomas was becoming the leading man of the settlement. Thomas Polk was one of the principal promoters of the new county of Mecklenburg, formed in 1762, one of its original magistrates, and a captain and finally colonel in the militia. He was a member of the county's first delegation to the provincial assembly and served there every year save one from 1766 to 1774.3

Presumably, young Ezekiel Polk did not fail to profit from the lessons in frontier leadership thus afforded. But the captain was able to do even more for his youngest brother. By 1769, when Ezekiel was twenty, the frontier had moved so far toward the mountains that a new county was formed across the Catawba and named for the governor with whom the Polks had recently allied themselves. Captain Polk's counterpart across the river was his brother-in-law, Captain ThomasNeal, and the two of them together seem to have controlled the patronage of the new county. So it was that Ezekiel appeared at the first court of Tryon County


3 D. A. Tompkins, History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte from 1740 to 1921 (Charlotte, 1922), I, 149. The standard account of the Regulator movement is John Spencer Bassett, "The Regulators of North Carolina (1765-1771)," in American Historical Association, Annual Report (1894), 141-172.

and produced a commission from Governor Tryon naming him clerk of court, a lucrative and politically important post in eighteenth-century local government.\(^4\)

About the same time, Ezekiel took a wife, Maria (or Nanny) Wilson, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Mecklenburg. He and his bride established themselves on a two hundred acre farm, some thirty miles west of the Catawba and just south of Kings Mountain, on the main road leading through the new county and down to Charlestown.\(^5\)

The early years of Tryon County were no more peaceful than those of Mecklenburg. The provincial boundary still had not been surveyed, the four or five hundred families in the area refused to pay taxes or to buy their lands, civil officers were treated with contempt, and the country had become a haven for the horse thieves and other desperate characters of both Carolinas. The establishment of the new county, however, improved the situation, and its officials were soon exercising their authority over large parts of the adjoining province.\(^6\)

Ezekiel was able to devote most of his time to farming, though four times a year he had to attend the county court at a neighbor's house and occasionally to transact public business at home. The county paid him ten pounds a year, and, more important, he was allowed substantial fees for all his services. Within a few years he must have been accounted wealthy, as such things were judged on the frontier.\(^7\) But in 1772 Ezekiel's fair prospects for political advancement were blasted. In that year, the provincial boundary was at last surveyed, and both Thomas Neal and Ezekiel found to their dismay that they were living in South Carolina.\(^8\)

\(^4\) Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, Tryon County, N. C., 1769-1779, July Term, 1769, microfilm, N. C. Department of Archives and History.

\(^5\) For Maria Wilson Polk's family, see Chalmers G. Davidson, *Major John Davidson of "Rural Hill," Mecklenburg County, N. C.* (Charlotte, 1943), 6-7. The location of Ezekiel's plantation is indicated in Land Book 22, p. 22, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State, Raleigh; also, assignments of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769, and April Term, 1771.


\(^7\) Clarence W. Griffin, *History of Old Tryon and Rutherford Counties, North Carolina*, 1730-1936 (Asheville, 1937), 8; county expenses, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769. Griffin is mistaken as to the location of Charles McLean's, where the early courts were held; actually he lived south of Kings Mountain, adjacent to Ezekiel Polk. See Land Book 22, p. 22, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State; and assignments of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769.

\(^8\) Saunders, *N. C. Colonial Records*, IX, 302; Tryon Court Minutes, July and October Terms, 1772.
It was not long, however, before these aggressive North Carolina politicians were exercising equal sway in the New Acquisition, as South Carolina denominated the district acquired under the boundary settlement. Within a year or two, Thomas Neal was colonel and Ezekiel was lieutenant-colonel of the district militia. Ezekiel's family was, meanwhile, growing along with his local consequence. In 1770, Maria presented him with twins, Thomas and Matilda. A second son, Samuel (who was to father James K. Polk, the president), was born in 1772, and a third, William, about two years later.

The chaotic conditions that accompanied the American Revolution afforded unusual opportunities for ambitious men to get ahead. Ezekiel was unquestionably ambitious; he was also regarded by some as the most talented of all the Polk brothers. But there was a constitutional defect in his makeup, an instability of conviction and purpose, which was to prevent him from rising as far as his abilities seemed to promise.

Matters went auspiciously enough at first. Ezekiel was a delegate from the New Acquisition to the provincial congress that met in Charleston in June, 1775, and he was commissioned a captain in the regiment of mounted rangers authorized by this session. The regiment was raised for operations in the interior, where opposition to lowcountry leadership was so strong that it was uncertain whether Whig or Loyalist forces would win control. It was in this ticklish situation that Ezekiel displayed his independence—or his unreliability. He had been in the Whig camp only four days when, enraged by an order to march the regiment to the coast, he announced to the Whig commander that he alone was responsible for his company and that he "would not sacrifice their Healths for no Council of Safety's Parading notions." The rangers were raised, declared Captain Polk, to protect the frontiers and not the plantations of lowcountry nabobs. Whereupon he marched his men home.


[Democratic Central Committee], *Vindication of the Revolutionary Character and Services of the Late Col. Ezekiel Polk, of Mecklenburg, N. C.* (Nashville, 1841), 14.

Alexander S. Salley, Jr., ed., "Papers of the First Council of Safety of the Revolutionary Party in South Carolina, June-November, 1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, I (1900), 69. Information on Ezekiel's career in South Carolina is drawn from the following sources: Extracts from the Journal of the South Carolina Provincial Congress of June, 1775, copied into a note-
Within a few weeks, however, Ezekiel had thought better of his course and was begging the Whigs to take him back. To prove that his Whiggery was of the strictest variety, he took charge of the dirty business of coercing Loyalists and the wavering to take the Whig side. These activities won the restoration of his commission as captain. In December, 1775, he led his company in the campaign against the Loyalists that ended in the battle at Reedy River. The expedition against the Cherokees the following summer, in which Ezekiel effectively led three hundred militia from the New Acquisition, seems to have been his last military service in South Carolina.

Ezekiel's political gyrations had so undermined his position with the people of the New Acquisition as to cloud his prospects for future advancement. He was left out of the district delegation to the provincial congress that met in November, 1775, and it was only by getting up a second election and appealing to his friends in the congress that he obtained a seat. He had probably never been quite happy in South Carolina, and in 1776 he moved his family back to Mecklenburg, among his old friends and relations. Buying a two hundred and sixty acre farm from his brother Thomas, he settled down on the east side of Sugar Creek, about ten miles below the little county seat town of Charlotte.  


18 The prevailing impression that Ezekiel Polk did not move to Mecklenburg until 1778 has been based on the imperfect recollections of several of his old neighbors, recorded in the 1840's. He did not attend the South Carolina general assembly of September-October, 1776, to which he was elected. A. S. Salley, Jr., ed.,
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tion that he obtained a seat at South Carolina, and in 1776 
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acre farm from his brother 
Sugar Creek, about ten miles 
from Charleston.

The Mecklenburg Polks had been in the very forefront of the Revolutionary movement. Thomas and his son William had received 
continental commissions as colonel and major, while Ezekiel's other brothers, 
Charles and John, served as captains in various campaigns. But when 
Ezekiel returned to North Carolina, the continental commissions had 
all been allotted, and the theatre of war had moved to the northern 
colonies, leaving Mecklenburg relatively undisturbed. He devoted himself, 
therefore, to farming, and began to amass a large amount of property. In 
1778, he opened a tavern on the courthouse square in Charlotte. His 
appointment the following year as justice of the peace indicated that 
for the third time in a decade he was becoming a man of consequence 
in a new community.

By this time, however, war was again bearing down on the Carolinas.
When Charlestown fell, in the summer of 1780, and the British legions of 
Lord Cornwallis advanced into the interior of South Carolina, the Meck-
lenburg militia was called out to deal with British foraging parties and 
with the Loyalists who were organizing west of the Catawba. Ezekiel 
went on the expedition against the Loyalists, but the battle at Ramsour's 
Mill was fought before his detachment reached the scene. He seems to 
have been in the field on several other occasions during the summer, and 
also assisted the Presbyterian clergy in haranguing the militia and "exhort-
ing them to be true to their country."

Horatio Gates' defeat at Camden in August, 1780, opened the way for 
a British invasion of North Carolina. By September 25, Cornwallis' army 
was camped within a few miles of Ezekiel's farm, and the next day it 

Journal of the General Assembly of South Carolina, September 17, 1776-October 
20, 1776 (Columbia, 1909), 161. A strong family tradition indicates that the birth 
of Ezekiel's fifth child, William, on September 10, 1776, took place in Mecklenburg.
Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk." 67: The deed from Thomas Polk to Ezekiel Polk, on October 3, 
1776, of 260 acres for £200, lists both as being "of Mecklenburg." Record of Deeds, Mecklenburg County, N. C., Second Series, Book 5, p. 234, Office of the 
Register of Deeds, Charlotte. The family graveyard, where Ezekiel buried his first 
wife and at least two of his children, may be seen today in the dense woods about 
two miles northwest of Pineville, just east of Sugar Creek, and fixes the location of 
his plantation.

13 Mecklenburg Deeds, First Series, Book 26, p. 80; Minute Book, Court of 
Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1774-1785, Mecklenburg County, N. C., October 16, 
1778, and October Term, 1779, Office of Clerk of Court, Charlotte.

14 Raleigh North Carolina Standard, Sept. 18, 1844. See also Vindication of 
Ezekiel Polk, 14.
moved into Charlotte, where the general set up headquarters in Thomas Polk’s “White House,” the only painted building in the village. At this point, Ezekiel’s nerve failed again. In order to save his substantial property in lands, crops, slaves, and the Charlotte tavern, he went to the British headquarters and “took protection,” promising to remain peacefully at home and to co-operate with the invaders.18

The annihilation of the left wing of the British army at Kings Mountain, early in October, forced Cornwallis to withdraw to South Carolina. With the enemy gone, some of the more zealous Whigs wanted to punish Ezekiel for his latest defection, but most Mecklenburgers were unwilling to condemn him too harshly (he was, after all, a Polk), and moderate counsels prevailed. Ezekiel picked this embarrassing moment to make a trip to Pennsylvania, possibly to attend to business relating to his father’s estate, and probably also to allow resentments to cool. He must have been still away when Cornwallis marched through Mecklenburg the following spring, on his way to Guilford Courthouse and Yorktown.18

Mecklenburg had seen its last of the British, but Mecklenburgers in large numbers engaged in the ensuing struggle to drive the remaining enemy forces out of South Carolina. Ezekiel seems to have restored himself to the good graces of his neighbors by some service in this final stage of the war, but precisely when and where is not known.19 In 1782, the Mecklenburg magistrates, with only two dissenting, elected him sheriff. But the day after his election he was back in the county court complaining loudly of the condition of the jail, and within three months the unpredictable Ezekiel had resigned.18

With the war won, it remained only for the victors to reap the spoils. The ambitious politicians who had risen to power in North Carolina

18 Thomas G. Polk to Bishop Leonidas Polk, June 21 [1852], and Benson J. Lossing to Bishop Leonidas Polk, June 12, 1852, Polk Family of North Carolina Collection, Library of Congress; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9, 11-13; Raleigh *North Carolina Standard*, Sept. 18, 1844.
19 *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9-10, 12.
20 *Ibid.*, 11, 13; Revolutionary Vouchers, Salisbury District, No. 5138, to Ezekiel Polk for militia services, N. C. Department of Archives and History; Revolutionary Accounts, Vol. VI, folio 88, p. 1; Vol. XII, folio 26, p. 4, and folio 31, p. 4, to Ezekiel Polk, N. C. Department of Archives and History.
21 Mecklenburg Court Minutes, 1774-1785, April 10-11, 1782, and July Term, 1782.
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18, 19, 20, 21, June 21 [1852], to Ezekiel
archives and History: Revolutionary
6, p. 4, and folio 37, p. 4, to Ezekiel

April 10-11, 1782, and July Term,
during the Revolution missed few opportunities. They began their op-
erations with confiscated Loyalist property and unsold lands in the settled
portion of the state, but the real prize was the domain lying beyond the
mountains and stretching to the Mississippi. In 1780 and 1782, provision
was made for soldiers' land bounties in a part of the territory, most of the
bounty rights eventually being purchased by speculator-politicians.
The rest of the vast area was disposed of by an astonishing act of 1783,
under which millions of acres went for a song to a small group of insiders.
The architect of this colossal grab was William Blount, an eastern poli-
tician with an eye to the main chance, but among his prominent associates
was Thomas Polk.19

Ezekiel did not rank high enough in political circles to participate
directly in the rich loot, but he was Thomas Polk's brother. Accordingly,
he secured from the same legislature that passed the land law an appoint-
ment as one of the surveyors of the boundary of the district set aside
for military grants. He received a generous piece of western land for
his services and, also, an additional tract for locating some choice grants
for Thomas Polk while on the survey. But Indian raids soon put an end
to surveying, and Ezekiel returned home.20

In the meantime, the family on the Sugar Creek plantation was grow-
ing; a fourth daughter, Ezekiel's eighth child, was born in 1790. The
peaceful life of the plantation, however, was not satisfying to a man of his
restless temperament. In 1790, he secured an appointment as deputy sur-
veyor of land grants in the western territory, and in August the family set
out on the arduous journey over the mountains to settle on a military
grant Ezekiel had purchased five years earlier. They established their
new home north of the Cumberland River on Richland Creek, a branch
of the Sulphur Fork of Red River, in the newly created Tennessee
County.21

19 Thomas P. Abernethy, From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study
in Frontier Democracy (Chapel Hill, 1932), 35-36. For the grantees, see Card Index
to Tennessee Land Grants, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State, and Book of Warrants
Issued by John Armstrong's Office, Tennessee Land Office, Nashville.
20 Grant to Ezekiel Polk for services as surveyor, Land Grants, Middle District,
File No. 3, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State; Minutes of Circuit Court, 1810-
1815, Maury County, Tenn., 1253; Minutes of County Court, 1800-1812, Williamson
County, Tenn., Oct. 14, 1806. Where Tennessee public documents are cited, the
typedcript copies in the Tennessee State Library, Nashville, have been used.
21 Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 205; Stockley Donelson to Colonel William Polk,
The Blount-controlled North Carolina legislature had recently ceded the entire western country to the United States, with the important reservation that all North Carolina land grants should be recognized, and the cession was conditional upon being organized as a federal territory. The Indians, however, still held the larger part of the area, and since most of the land grants could not be surveyed and perfected for many years, it was essential that the speculators control the new territory. This was why Blount got himself appointed territorial governor, and the same consideration caused him to designate Thomas Polk’s brother as one of the nine magistrates for Tennessee county.22

The first settlements in this part of the Southwest Territory had been made two years earlier, but the original pioneers had been driven off by the Indians. Now, with the Indian menace suspended, immigrants were coming in large numbers, grants had to be surveyed, and Ezekiel, once he got his cabin built and his family established, must have had steady employment. But within less than a year the Polks moved back to North Carolina, escaping a new and more terrible period of Indian warfare, in which many of their erstwhile neighbors lost their lives.23

The main reason for the return was probably the long and painful illness which finally brought the death of Ezekiel’s wife, Maria, in the fall of 1791. Maria Polk was a deeply pious woman—she died singing one of Isaac Watts’ hymns—and judging from her elaborate tombstone, Ezekiel was devoted to her. His unfortunate proclivity for versification was indulged in Maria’s epitaph:

Here unalarm’d at Death’s last Stroke
Lies in this tomb MARIA POLK

May 15, 1790, Polk-Yeates Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Ezekiel Polk’s bond as deputy surveyor, Aug. 25, 1790, Polk Family Papers; Colonel William Polk to Colonel Robert Hays, Aug. 16, 1790, Miscellaneous Papers, N. C. Department of Archives and History; Land Grants, Davidson County, Tenn., File No. 220, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State.


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's last Stroke
A POLK

A tender Mother virtuous Wife
Resign'd in every Scene of life
Truly pious without parade
where want appear'd she lent her Aid.
To heavenly Courts she did repair
May those she lov'd all meet her there.24

In less than a year, however, Ezekiel had married again. Not one of the several children his new wife bore him survived infancy, as had none of her five children by a former marriage.25 The older children were now

24 Gravestone of Maria Polk, Polk Graveyard, near Pineville, N. C. The epitaph continues as follows:

Supported by the Hope of a happy Death
and of a glorious Resurrection to eternal Life she bore a tedious and painful illness with a truly Christian Fortitude.—The last Exercise of her feeble Voice was employed in singing the 33rd Hymn of the 2d. Book of Dr. Watts Composition: in which, anticipating the Joys of the blessed Society above, she exchanged the earthly for the heavenly Melody.
Raise thee my Soul fly up and run" &c. xxxiii. B. ii

THIS MONUMENT
The last offering and Token of Respect that can be paid by the living to continue her Memory on the Minds of her surviving Friends and to perpetuate to Posterity the Name and Character of such an excellent Woman
IS ERECTED
By the faithful and grateful Partner of her Life & Affectance

Her mild and gentle Spirit was dismissed from its earthy Mansion on the 29th Day of Novr. 1791, in the 45th Year of her Age; and she left an affectionate Family in particular, and all her Acquaintance in general to deplore the loss.

While the dear Dust she leaves behind,
Sleeps in thy Bosom, sacred Tomb:
Soft be her Bed, her Slumbers kind,
And all her Dreams of Joys to come.
Farewel bright Soul, a short Farewel,
Till we shall meet again above
In the sweet Groves where Pleasures dwell,
And Trees of Life bear Fruits of Love.

25 Gravestones of Eliza Polk and "Still born son of EZEKIEL POLK," Polk Graveyard. The epitaph on the latter seems, also, to have been composed by Ezekiel:
growing up, Matilda became the wife of John Campbell in 1792. Two years later, her twin, Tom, and the next brother, Sam, took wives to themselves, and by 1793, Ezekiel was six times a grandfather. But all was not peaceful in Mecklenburg. The bitter party conflicts in the capital of the young republic were echoed in the backwoods; Ezekiel was a zealous Jeffersonian, and relations with his Federalist nephew William, who had assumed leadership of the family upon the death of Thomas, in 1794, must have been strained.

The hottest battles of the day, however, raged around Mecklenburg’s deeply entrenched Presbyterian churches. Deism, flowing into America on the strong tide of eighteenth-century rationalism and flowering in the postwar years of social and political upheaval, had insinuated itself even into this remote rampart of orthodox Calvinism. The ringleaders of the dissidents were Ezekiel and his neighbor, Ezra Alexander, while the counterattack was led by the pastors of Providence and Sugar Creek churches, James Wallis and Samuel C. Caldwell. The deists organized a debating society, which met up and down Sugar Creek to hold Biblical revelation up to the light of reason, and maintained a circulating library of deistic writers, probably the property of Ezekiel.

Beneath this slab lies here Interred
An innocent that never Er’d
A Mother’s Hope in racking pain
A Sixth time blasted are again
April the 2d, 1793
Still born son of
EZEKIEL POLK
Transient sojourner thou wast
Born to travel to the sky
Just the Saviour’s cup to taste
Just to suffer and to die
Then thy Spirit took its flight
Soaring to the plains of light,
O my happy Infant friend
Shall I thee again behold
Jesus now this warfare end
Come and take me to thy fold
Then shall I matured in love
Kiss my little friend above.

The name of Ezekiel’s second wife is given variously as Bessie Davis and Polly Campbell.

28 Rogers, “Ezekiel Polk,” 15, 24, 59. Samuel Polk married Jane Knox of Iredell County, N. C. The future president, James Knox Polk, born Nov. 2, 1795, was the oldest of their ten children.
That Ezekiel had been orthodox enough in 1791 is indicated by Maria's epitaph, but the removal of her influence, the disappointing deaths of all his children by his second wife, the vagaries of his active but eccentric mind, and, perhaps, clashes with the strong-willed Parson Wallis, probably accounted for the change. This dangerous movement died away quickly, when most of its leaders moved to the West, and any surviving weeds were burned off by the Great Revival of 1802. But the decisive blow to infidelity had been dealt by Parson Wallis himself. The matter had fallen out as follows.

In the summer of 1797 a certain John Johnson of Tennessee appeared in Mecklenburg and began trying to stir up interest in a proposed settlement in the great bend of the Tennessee River near Muscle Shoals. The lands were a part of the notorious Yazoo grants made by the Georgia legislature two years before, and the chief promoter of the project was a Georgian, Zachariah Cox. Unfortunately, the grant lay in Indian country, where settlement was forbidden by law. Nevertheless, on the basis of a private agreement with a few of the Indians concerned, Cox had begun to raise a small army and was promising a thousand acres to any man who would outfit himself and stay with the enterprise for one year. A large quantity of arms, including small cannon, had been purchased in Philadelphia, and boats were being built near Knoxville for the descent of the Tennessee. Cox had taken the additional precaution of securing the support of prominent Tennessee politicians by generous grants of land—Senator Andrew Jackson received a thousand acres; Senator Joseph Anderson, fifteen thousand; and Governor John Sevier, fifty thousand.

When Johnson described this grandiose but illegal project in Mecklenburg, the combustible imagination of Ezekiel Polk was fired, and he

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27 William H. Foote, Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical, Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers (New York, 1849), 248-249; J. B. Alexander, The History of Mecklenburg County from 1740 to 1900 (Charlotte, 1922), 78, 281-282. Ezra Alexander died in 1800 and is buried in the Polk Graveyard. Ezekiel Polk's library at the time of his death included works by Gibbon and Hume, plus fifteen "miscellaneous" volumes, untitled in the inventory of his estate; this was probably the deistic library said to have been carried to Tennessee about 1800. Willis and Inventories, Hardeman County, Tenn., Book I, 1823-1835, p. 14. See also James Wallis' pamphlet, The Bible Defended: Being an Investigation of the Misrepresentations and Falsehoods of Thomas Paine's Age of Reason, Part the Second: Wherein Also, the Evidences of Revealed Religion Are Stated, and the Authenticity and Divine Authority of the Several Books of the Bible Are Vindicated (Halifax, N. C., 1797).
proceeded to raise a party of twenty-five men to join Cox. About the
time Ezekiel and his followers left for Tennessee in July, Parson Wallis
saw his chance to strike a blow for religion. Consulting prominent
Federalists in the neighborhood, he rushed off to the federal district
judge, John Sigreaves, a deposition hinting darkly that "from the
mysterious manner in which the business has been conducted, much
more is contemplated by the authors of it than is promulgated, or perhaps
generally suspected."

The Federalists had been jumpy for some time over the intrigues of
the Spanish, Indian troubles, the exposure of Blount's alleged conspiracy
with the British, and countless other plots in the troubled Southwest;
and Wallis's charges filled them with alarm. The judge hurried a copy
of the Wallis statement to Philadelphia, at the same time dispatching the
federal marshal after Polk and Johnson. Secretary of State Timothy
Pickering wrote in haste to President John Adams, at home in Massa-
chusetts, proposing a proclamation to "warn the people of their danger."
The same day, he directed the governors of the three southernmost states
to try to stop the enterprise, suggesting that it had some ulterior object.
He also instructed the federal attorneys in the South to publish warnings
against the project in the newspapers. The governor of South Carolina
offered a thousand dollar reward for information leading to the convic-
tion of the principals, while in North Carolina, Governor Ashe called an
emergency meeting of his council, issued a proclamation for the arrest of
Polk and Johnson as the instigators of "such daring and illegal proceed-
ings," and ordered the militia out in pursuit of them. But the adventurers
had long since made their escape.28

28 Isaac J. Cox, ed., "Documents Relating to Zachariah Cox," Quarterly Publica-
tion of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, VIII (1913), 92-99;
Historical Society, Publications, No. 1 (1880), 144-146; No. 2 (1926), 144-148;
No. 3 (1937), 159-160; No. 5 (1933), 165-166; American State Papers, Public Lands,
1, 93, 244; Colonel William Polk to Gen. William R. Davie, Aug. 9, 1797, photo-
stat, and Oliver Wolcott to James McHenry, Sept. 15, 1797, James McHenry Papers,
Library of Congress; Timothy Pickering to Judge John Sigreaves, Aug. 1, 1797,
same to President John Adams, Aug. 3, 1797, same to the governors of North
Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, Aug. 3, 1797, copies, Pickering Papers,
Massachusetts Historical Society; Timothy Pickering to the attorneys for North
Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, Aug. 3, 1797, same to James McHenry,
Sept. 30, 1797, copies, United States Department of State, Domestic Letters, National
Archives; proclamation of the governor of South Carolina, Aug. 24, 1797, and
men to join Cox. About the 
enee in July, Parson Wallison. Consulting prominent 
ed off to the federal districting darkly that "from the 
has been conducted, much 
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e the time over the intrigues of 
of Blount's alleged conspiracy 
in the troubled Southwest; 

n. The judge hurried a copy 
the same time dispatching the 
Secretary of State Timothy 
Adams, at home in Massa 
the people of their danger," 
the three southernmost states at it had some ulterior object. 
he South to publish warnings 
governor of South Carolina 
ation leading to the convic 
tina, Governor Ashe called an 
proclamation for the arrest of 
daring and illegal proceed 
of them. But the adventurers 

As for dark purposes, Ezekiel's nephew, William, was reassuring: 
... it is a mere land speculation without any expectation at least by E. P. of 
seeing or experiencing any danger. I know his weak nerves too well, to believe 
he would hazard himself where there would be the most distant idea that blood 
would be split. Mr. Polk is a man charged with impatience, has no fortitude; 
fickle in the extreme, a lover of home, and never saw blood but from a lancet 
or his nose in his life; from such a leader I fear nothing. 28

Cox did not appear at the appointed rendezvous when Ezekiel's men 
reached Tennessee, and some of them became discouraged and returned home. Most of the rest probably followed suit soon after, when it was 
learned that the Secretary of War had ordered the small army detachment 
ne Knoxville to prevent the Cox expedition from descending the Ten 
nessee. Cox then led his remaining followers overland to the mouth of the 
Cumberland, and the next summer he descendened the Mississippi for some 
unknown purpose. Arrested by the Federalist governor of the Mississippi 
Territory, Cox escaped, received protection from the Spanish governor 
at New Orleans, and finally made his way back to Tennessee, where his 
old friends, the officials of that state, gave him a clean bill of health. 
Ezekiel's name drops out of the Cox story after the summer of 1797. He 
may have accompanied the adventurers as far as the mouth of the 
Cumberland, but it is unlikely that he pursued the chimera further. 29

It was six years later, in the fall of 1803, that Ezekiel quit Mecklenburg 
for good. The Indian menace had almost disappeared in middle Tennessee, 
immigration was booming, and conditions were favorable for a return 
to his short-time home on the waters of Red River. Within a few years, 
all of Ezekiel's sons and daughters but Sam had joined him in what 
is now Robertson County, Thomas, William, and probably John, now had 
families of their own, and John Campbell, Matilda's husband, brought his 

Zachariah Cox," Quarterly Publici 
y of Ohio, VIII (1913), 92-99; 
30. John Sevier," East Tennessee 
144-145; No. 2 (1930), 144-148; 
heen State Papers, Public Lands, 
1 R. Davis, Aug. 9, 1797, photo 
2. 15, 1797, James McHenry Pape 
e John Sigreaves, Aug. 1, 1797, 
to the governors of North 
4, 1797, copies, Pickering Papers, 
ring to the attorneys for North 
5, 1797, same to James McHenry, 
State, Domestic Letters, National 
th Carolina, Aug. 24, 1797, and 

President John Adams to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 25, 1797, United States Depart 
ment of State, Miscellaneous Letters, National Archives; Governor Samuel Ashe 
to Judge John Sigreaves, Aug. 14, 1797, same to Major General Robert Smith, 
Aug. 18, 1797, and minutes of the governor's council, Aug. 30, 1797, all to Governors' 
Letter Book and Journal of the Council of State, 1795-1855, N. C. Department of 
Archives and History; Halifax North Carolina Journal, Sept. 18, 25, 1797. 
28 Colonel William Polk to General W. R. Davis, Aug. 9, 1797, photostat, 
McHenry Papers. 
household also. Ezekiel gave them all lands adjacent to his own plantation, and, for the next few years, the growing clan settled down to the cultivation of tobacco and then cotton. 1

The Polks were not to be content very long. For in 1805 the Indians were persuaded to give up their claims to most of the lower half of middle Tennessee, and a great block of the land grants issued under the North Carolina act of 1783 were opened to settlement. Settlers began pouring in, and with the rest came Ezekiel, establishing himself on the waters of Duck River, at the head of Carter's Creek, then in Williamson County but now in the northeastern part of Maury, on the twenty-five hundred acre tract he had received as locator for Thomas Polk while on the military boundary survey in 1783. 2

Ezekiel's son John had died in Robertson the previous year, and another son, Thomas, apparently turned a deaf ear to his father's urgings to move again. But the rest of the children and their children were soon with him in the new country, including two unmarried daughters at home, Matilda and John Campbell, William and his wife, Clarissa and her new husband, Thomas McNeal, and at least nine grandchildren. Even Sam was persuaded the next year to leave Mecklenburg, bringing with him an eleven-year-old boy, James Knox Polk. They all settled near Ezekiel on farms he provided. 3

The Duck River country was real frontier. In 1807, it was still "in a wilderness State, there were but few inhabitants in the bounds of Maury

1 Abernethy, Frontier to Plantation, 198-199; Ezekiel Polk was still a resident of Mecklenburg in Sept., 1803, when he disposed of his lands there. Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Book 18, pp. 36, 39, 51, 59. The first record of Ezekiel in Robertson is of Feb. 7, 1804. Minutes of County Court, Robertson County, Tenn., 1796-1807, p. 176. For other references to the Polks in Robertson see ibid., 179, 181, 183, 197, 200, 203, 209, 211, 217, 221, 223, 233, 235, 246; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-1811, p. 49; General Index to Deeds, Robertson County, Tenn., Book O, 1796-1838; Wills, Inventories, Bonds, Etc., Robertson County, Tenn., Vol. I, 1796-1812, pp. 70, 82, 85, 88-90, 211, 217, 232; Records of Superior Court of Law and Equity, Micro District, Tenn., Pleas, 1805-1807, Part I, p. 56.

2 Abernethy, Frontier to Plantation, 187-188; indenture between Charles Polk and William Polk, Sept. 10, 1806, Polk-Yeatman Collection; Land Grants, Middle District of Tennessee, File No. 91, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State.

3 Robertson Wills, Etc., 70, 83-85, 98-99; Robertson Court Minutes, 1796-1807, pp. 203, 211, 217, 223; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-1811, p. 40; General Index to Deeds, Bargainor, Maury County, Tenn., Vol. I, 1807-1843, p. 195; Minutes of County Court, Maury County, Tenn., Vol. I, Book B, 1810-1825, 7; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15-48.
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spos of his lands there. Mecklen-

59: The first record of Ezekiel ty Court, Robertson County, Tenn., fik in Robertson see ibid., 179, 181, 146; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-

County Tenn., Book O, 1795-1838; inty, Tenn., Vol. I, 1796-1813, pp. tor Court of Law and Equity, Mero

88; indenture between Charles Polk in Collection; Land Grants, Middle N. C. Secretary of State.

Robertson Court Minutes, 1796-1807, 5, 1808-1813, p. 46; General Index to l. I, 1807-1849, p. 193; Minutes of xk B, 1810-1825, 7; Rogers, "Ezekiel

County, and no Settlement older than one year." 99 The river ran from east to west through a hilly terrain, and most of the farms were in the fertile valleys of the creeks that emptied from the north and south into the river. Near two of these, Carter's and Rutherford's, and along the main road from Nashville, settled the Polks.

Ezekiel, virtually a patriarch at sixty, was beginning to be overshadowed by the vigorous younger men of the clan, all of whom were soon moderately wealthy and influential. Sam and William Polk and Thomas McNeal took a prominent part in organizing the new county of Maury in 1807. Sam was a magistrate within two years, and William a few years later. Thomas McNeal and William were militia captains by the end of the War of 1812, and Sam was a major. McNeal, however, had had to enter Jackson's army as a private in 1813, because the prejudices of the members of his company "against men of wealth and tallents" prevented his expected election as captain. When John Campbell died, in 1816, he left a substantial estate, including nine slaves, nine horses, thirty cattle, and a hundred and nine hogs. Sam inherited a major share of the Polks' unique talents for land speculation and was eventually the wealthiest of the family. 88

But Ezekiel was not the kind of man to be completely overshadowed by even the most energetic sons. It was he who was selected to appeal to his friend Andrew Jackson, when the Maury volunteers for the New Orleans expedition of 1813 suffered the supreme indignity of the frontier soldier—being placed under the command of a captain from another county and in whose choice they had had no voice. 89

The old man, however, was fit for more than writing letters. His second wife had died, probably in another unhappy attempt to bear a healthy child, and by 1811, Ezekiel had married for a third time. The

88 Mary W. Highsaw, "A History of Zion Community in Maury County, 1806-


89 Flournoy Rivers, "The Beginnings of Maury County," American Historical Magazine, III (1858), 140-144; Maury Court Minutes, 1803-1809, pp. 28, 46, 70, 75; Maury Will and Minutes, 1820-1825, 7, 135, 262; Mrs. John Trotwood Moore, ed., "Record of Commissions of Officers in the Tennessee Militia," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, III (1944), 90; V (1945), 279; power of attorney to "Mr. Samuel Polk," Jan. 31, 1815, University of North Carolina Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Dr. Horace Depriest to General John Coffee, Dec. 20, 1813, Andrew Jackson Papers, Library of Congress.

90 Ezekiel Polk to Major General Andrew Jackson, Sept. 3, 1813, Jackson Papers.
new wife was a "young, handsome & Agreeable" widow, Mrs. Sophia Neely Lennard. The irrepressible patriarch now proceeded to have four more children, the last of them when he was seventy-one years of age. In the course of a long life, he had fathered at least fourteen children, who, in turn, by conservative computation, were the progenitors of ninety-two children and three hundred and seven grandchildren.

Ezekiel's energies were not yet exhausted. In 1828, the last major section of Tennessee to be cleared of Indian claims, including all of the state west of the Tennessee River, was thrown open to settlement, and the old colonel, in his seventy-fourth year, felt one last call to a pioneering venture. In 1821, he went out to the country along the Big Hatchie River, cleared lands and put up cabins, and early in the winter moved his family to the new home.

This was the first important settlement in that part of western Tennessee, and the pioneering pattern associated with Ezekiel soon repeated itself. Within a few years, he was joined by the families of Thomas McNeel, William, and his most recently acquired son-in-law, Thomas J. Hardeman. The richness of the cotton lands and the navigability of the Big Hatchie caused the community to grow rapidly. In 1823, a new county was laid off and named for Hardeman's father. The first county court of Hardeman was held at Thomas McNeel's and presided over by William Polk. Sam Polk did not move to Hardeman, but he had a plantation there, and he built the first mill in the county. The county seat was moved shortly from the village of Hatchie to a new town established on land given by Sam and another man. It is not wholly fanciful to suppose that Ezekiel dictated the naming of the new town for the most conspicuous revolutionary of the time, Bolivar.

For the last time Ezekiel settled down to watch the frontier pass beyond him, to consolidate the gains of another pioneering venture, and to oversee the affairs of a vigorous clan. He continued to grow more wealthy and began to plan a pretentious, white-pillared house, to be

88 The computation is from Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," and is incomplete.
89 Sam Polk to Colonel William Polk, Sept. 9, 1831, Polk-Yeaman Collection.
90 Warner W. Clift, Early History of Hardeman County, Tennessee (Master's Thesis, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1930), 9-11, 16; Samuel Cole Williams, Beginnings of West Tennessee: In the Land of the Chickasaws, 1541-1841 (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 147-149.
called "Mecklen." But Ezekiel did not live to see this monument to his metamorphosis from pioneer to southern gentleman; he died on August 31, 1824, before construction began. He left a large estate, including thousands of acres, twenty-four slaves, nine horses, one hundred and twenty-three hogs, thirty-six cattle, twenty-two sheep, and a library of seventy volumes.41

Ezekiel was characteristically jealous of his fame. Immediately before leaving Maury, he had tried to insure a just picture of himself for posterity by composing his own epitaph, which he left at his death with specific instructions: "As there is no rock in this country fit for grave stones, let it be done on durable wood, well painted, and placed upright at my head, and a weeping willow planted at my feet." It is only just to the old colonel to give the inscription in full:

Here lies the dust of old E. P.
One instance of mortality;
Pennsylvania born, Carolina bred,
In Tennessee died on his bed.
His youthful days he spent in pleasure,
His latter days in gathering treasure;
From superstition liv'd quite free,
And practised strict morality.
To holy cheats was never willing
To give one solitary shilling,
He can foresee, (and for foreseeing
He equals most of men in being,) That church and state will join their power,
And misery on this country shower;
The Methodists with their camp bawling,
Will be the cause of this down falling;
An error not destin'd to see,
He wails for poor posterity,
First fruits and tenths are odious things,
And so are Bishops, Tithes and Kings.42

41 Hardeman Wills and Inventories, 9-14. "Mecklen" was completed after Ezekiel's death and was still standing in 1950, in a greatly dilapidated condition, a short distance west of Bolivar.
42Jackson Gazette, Sept. 13, 1824, printed two weeks after Polk's death, from a manuscript in his own hand.
James K. Polk, perhaps unfortunately, inherited none of his doughty grandfather's singular characteristics. Ezekiel did bequeath to his grandson enough kin in Hardeman to make the county the one Polk political stronghold in that part of the state, but the old colonel also left a less auspicious political legacy—his epitaph. Methodists were voters, and in the hard-fought campaign of 1844 a Presidential candidate could ill afford a posthumous indulgence of ancestral foibles. The offending monument was uncememoniously removed from public view, and not until the twentieth century did this final salty distillation of the free-ranging spirit of Ezekiel Polk resume its rightful place among the sedate memorials to his descendants in the Polk Cemetery at Bolivar.43

The colonel would be immensely pleased to know that he is at last attracting some slight attention from posterity, even if we can only exclaim with his prosaic son Sam, "Is he not a strange old man!!"44

43 The stories about the peregrinations of Ezekiel's remains and tombstone rest on local and family tradition and are confused. All agree that he was originally buried in the Polk Cemetery in the town of Bolivar, probably under the wooden slab he requested. In 1831, the family seems to have replaced the wooden marker with a marble one and transferred the epitaph to it. All agree that the tombstone was later removed from the cemetery to “Mecklenburg” but it is uncertain whether Ezekiel's remains went with it. One account says that the tombstone remained secreted in the family smokehouse until it was dragged out during the Civil War by Union soldiers.

It is certain, however, that in the 1890's the marble slab was lying broken and forgotten on the grounds of the much dilapidated “Mecklenburg.” It is also certain that at some time the lines about the Methodists had been chiseled out. When the writer visited Bolivar in 1950, however, the old stone had been mended, the offensive section had been restored, and Ezekiel's monument was back in the Polk Cemetery.

When inscribing the stone, the family made several attempts to improve Ezekiel's verse. In the third line from the bottom “waits” became “waits,” and “Tithes” in the bottom line was changed to “Priests.” There are also variations in spelling and punctuation.

See Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 12; Albert V. Goodpasture, "The Boyhood of President Polk," Tennessee Historical Magazine, VII (Apr., 1921), 38. Roy W. Black of Bolivar, a student of Hardeman County history, was also a helpful source of information.

Another embarrassment to James K. Polk in 1844 were the charges that his grandfather had been a Tory. The Vindication of Ezekiel Polk, published by the Democrats, made out a much better case for the colonel than the facts countenanced. The charges were not, of course, completely silenced, but they seem not to have been an important factor in the campaign.

44 Sam Polk to Colonel William Polk, Sept. 9, 1822, Polk-Yeatsman Collection.